

Transcendental Beings: Clothing the Soul

'The presence of textiles is of fundamental importance in human development. In most areas of the world the human infant requires protection and warmth which is provided by constructed wraps. Thus, we begin our association with textiles, our second skins, providers of modesty, social meaning, display and personal identity.' (Shreeve 1998: 41)

At birth one of our first senses is touch, first skin on skin, quickly followed by skin on fabric, or fur, wrapped, swaddled, held in that moment of arrival. This is a symmetry we find when we explore death and more explicitly burial practices. The need for the human body or the soul to be wrapped and elaborately dressed appears to be a preoccupation of the Ancient Andes cultures. As with other societies that originate from the same period such as the ancient Egyptians, practices associated with cloth and textile punctuate many of the rituals that relate to life and death.

In order to understand the extraordinary and ancient textiles on show here, the decorative woven mantles, together with the exceptional feather cloths and then the wrapping cloth fragments, relies on our ability to read these textiles, their symbolism and meaning, their rich codes and complex pattern structures, the juxtaposition of colour and their incredible presence. Object based research utilises methods that enable us to reach most cultures: Neil McGregor historian and former director of the British Museum explains that this 'allows us to ask critical questions.' But that also we have to be able to 'add to that a considerable leap of imagination, returning the artefact to its former life, engaging with it as generously, as poetically, as we can in the hope of winning the insights it may deliver.' (MacGregor 2010: xvii)

Enabling us to read intention and gather meaning from the remains of the ancient Andes civilisations, is clearly hugely important. The artefacts in this exhibition, many of them burial cloths, grave goods and mantles, allow us an insight into a complex period of manufacture that covers a period of 1800 years ending in 1500 AD. Over this time civilisations adapted and changed, but the belief systems and rituals around death practices particularly elite citizens and more disturbingly for sacrificial purposes, seem to have remained constant.

The textiles that date back to 300 BC the Paracas period are some of our earliest remaining textiles to exist alongside those excavated from the tombs in ancient Egypt, both were buried in dry and arid conditions, and remained undisturbed for 1000's of years. The textiles would have been found in Mummy Bundles and as part of grave goods, the construction of the fabrics and their transformation and finally construction into the bundles was a complex cross societal effort. 'Making the mummy bundles, in other words preparing the Paracas elite for burial, involved an elaborate ritual' (MacGregor 2010:156)

The Textiles in this exhibition can be understood in many ways, they represent a hugely skilled civilisation, who's extraordinary aesthetic vision would have been grounded in their immediate surroundings and their powerful connection to the cosmic realm. The incredible colour sense would almost certainly have emanated from their surroundings, the golds and yellows of the desert, the reds and browns from the insects and earth and the juxtaposition of brilliance in blue and green from the sky and the sea. In some works, we can identify a

preoccupation with animals, birds and reptiles, creatures and hybrid mythical beings feature in many works, reinforcing for us, this societies interest in the next life.

The majority of the mantles are expertly woven, interestingly some of the most important scholars in this field are themselves weavers, the Canadian weaver Mary Frame, has brought her own maker's insight into the construction and more importantly meaning of these cloths. The systems and methods at play within a weaver's making language would bring a unique embodied knowledge to play aiding understanding and helping to draw out deeper meaning. Thus, providing a unique perspective and judgement into what was at stake, both in terms of the complex and large-scale societal production of these burial cloths but also in relation to the belief held by historians that rather than communicate through words communication was via a complex system of images, symbols, pattern, scale and colour. Frame suggests that '...the color patterns represent a systematized code that reflects a form of cultural knowledge and that patterns may embody schema or formulas that had potential application to a wide range of experience.' (Bergh 2013:188)

The extraordinary feather cloths that appear to have a life, all of their own were found in burials, some of which have been attributed to the Wari a civilisation that dated from AD 600 to 1000, the precious nature of these works is emphasised by the way, that they are often found in large vessels. In one Wari burial '... the excavations are said to have uncovered eight faceneck jars, each containing twelve feathered mantles, between the two outer walls...' (King 2013:208). The vividly coloured plumage originates from many Amazonian birds amongst them macaws and hummingbirds.

One can only wonder what the purpose of these astonishing feather works might have been. Was it to assist the tombs occupants in negotiating the next realm? The flight of the spirit being depicted many times in half human, half bird form. It is also clear though as Susan E. Bergh suggests that 'Their iconography again indicates that the Wari associated birds with the highest status members of their society, who may have carried the title "mallku" (condor) or "huamani" (falcon) as paramount rulers did in later Andean times'. (Bergh 2013:174)

The Whitworth have in their permanent collection a medium sized fragment of feather cloth, the vivid orange and yellow feathers singing out to you, drawing you in, then you also begin to notice the subtlety at play in this work the ochre and sand colours, layered up, dark brown birds and yellow beasts also prowl across the surface. The cloth has an animated quality, perceptibly different from the woven and tie-dyed fabrics in the collection.

Feathers have frequently played a role in defining status and power through the way humans utilise them in dress. 'The appeal of feathers extends beyond aesthetics. Historically and cross-culturally, they have been used to convey both sexual and economic supremacy.' (Bolton 2004:81). One thinks back to the iconic fashion collections of the late Alexander McQueen, who often used the feather as a vehicle to transcend to create a mythology around a body of work all of its own. For the elite of the Ancient Andes, status, legend and an ability to navigate the next realm was an imperative, perhaps this is why these feather cloths are stored in this manner, for use later in their journey or as offerings to the gods. Sarah E Bergh comments that: 'The belief that the Wari lords possessed the ability to

mediate human and cosmic affairs, to act as intercessors in crucial matters that shaped the lives of men and women and as master of the intersections that those matters had with the realm of unseen forces that sway them profoundly.' (Bergh 2013;188) There was a sense of the dead journeying on to the next realm and influencing those left behind.

Dressing the dead or the soul is something many cultures adhere to, cloth, textiles and clothing are inextricably linked to rituals around death. Patricia Darish discusses the Kuba of Zaire and their production of raffia textiles for clothing and burial purposes as 'The dressing of the corpse reflects both individual and group beliefs about proper burial.' (Darish 1989:135) There is something about the intimacy of cloth, our second skin, protector and comforter, the academic Peter Stallybrass describes this close relationship to cloth he says 'The magic of cloth, I came to believe, is that it receives us: receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even.' (Stallybrass 2012:69)

A difficulty for us in fully understanding the motivations behind these textiles and the elaborate burials they were discovered in is that many of the burials were not systematically and scientifically recorded. Early excavations were undertaken by village communities. This led to conflicting reports on the position and quantity of the burials and objects. Many of the grave goods being divided amongst those that unearthed the objects, others such as the wrapping cloths and mantles burned, for fear of retribution from the gods.

The textiles in this exhibition have their own unique histories, clothing the living and the dead, few of them have detailed histories therefore we must utilise what we do know to read their stories. The tribes of the ancient Andes revered textiles and played out their religious beliefs across the warp and weft of the cloth. They took great care and committed vast resource to their production and later enactment at the moment of burial through the complex construction of the mummy bundles. This was in part to ensure their status and legacy was intact, but more powerfully to support them in negotiating the next phase of their spiritual journey.

References

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